In 2004/05, the first year of my second five-year term as The Ombudsman, we are completely delinked from Government. With the last seconded civil servant returned to Government, ours is now a workforce entirely appointed by me on contract. With flexible and prudent management, our financial situation has remained safe and sound.

Despite our total independence, some in the community still labour under a misconception that we are part of Government. It is true that my Office is funded from the public purse. However, The Ombudsman Ordinance makes it clear that "the Ombudsman shall not be regarded as a servant or agent of the Government". We are most certainly not a Government department. We are an independent and impartial monitor of Government and public bodies. We are accountable to the public. In this context, we investigate without fear or favour to establish facts and to improve public services.

A point often raised with me upon my discovery of maladministration is whose head should roll and how should the culprit be punished? My Office is not a court of law. The focus of my functions is not on individual officials. My inquiries are directed at systems, solutions to problems and improvement to administration. Staff discipline is a matter for the organisation concerned.

Questions have also been raised over fluctuations in our caseload and the outcome of our investigations. The simple answer is that we do not "cook the books". Our Office has no control over the kind, or the number, of complaints coming in. Certainly, I do not attempt to control the level of substantiation or not. We investigate each case impartially and objectively, presenting the outcome of our investigation solely on the basis of our findings.

Speaking of findings, I view with considerable concern that inadequate inter-departmental coordination remains a continuing, perhaps even growing, trend among Government bureaux and departments. This was first mentioned in my Annual Report 2003 and again featured in my Annual Report last year. There are now signs of different disciplines in Government becoming more compartmentalised. Some segments of the Administration seem to be forgetting, or ignoring, that they are an integral part of one and the same Government. This is worrying. It is not healthy. It impairs not only the efficiency in public services but also the image of Government.

The Ombudsman's Review

While the main business of my Office is handling public complaints, I am delighted to see growing awareness of my powers for direct investigation. This enables me to examine, even without complaints, systematic deficiencies and systemic problems in the public organisations listed in Schedule 1 to The Ombudsman Ordinance. I probe into these areas and propose improvement in the public interest.

My authority for direct investigation has gained greater recognition this year: Time and again, there have been calls from the public, the media and politicians for me to initiate direct investigation into matters of major community concern. While I appreciate the confidence in my Office, I ensure that such matters are properly within my jurisdiction and do not intrude upon the purview of other authorities.

Last year, I indicated that with 15 years experience behind us, it is time to review the jurisdiction of The Ombudsman. This review has begun. I am examining our current Schedule of Government departments and public bodies and the restrictions on my investigative powers and purview. This will make for more effective overview of public administration. In the final analysis, my aim is for good governance and ever better service for our community.